

Shoulder Bag

On the limits and constraints of what one life can hold



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Illustration by Rachel Frankel

In 2009, when I was twenty-two, I bought a small, black shoulder bag from a department store along the rue de Passy, in Paris. The bag was about twelve tall by ten inches wide, and made of a cheap sturdy fabric — the kind used to make dog toys, cargo pants, and discount patio furniture. Weighing no more than four or five pounds when full, it hung from an adjustable strap I always kept long. That way, the bag bounced pleasingly at my left hip as I walked down the street, in time to the metronome tap of my heels on the pavement.

Click, bump. Click, bump. Click, bump.

It was senior year of college, my semester abroad. Weekdays, I loaded the bag with history books, grammar books, art books, and film books. Weekends, I swapped in pleasure reading: Kundera novels, American expat memoirs. A few essential items claimed permanent residence in the bag — a red flip phone, a blue city map, a yellow pocket dictionary — but its contents were otherwise in perpetual flux.

When the bag was overstuffed, as it often was, the top flap wouldn't close, and the titles of my books were exposed to everyone around me on the Métro. Still, I liked the proportions of the bag, and never considered trading it in for a larger model. It was exactly the right size: big enough to hold all my vitals, but also small enough not to impede my adventures.

The bag made me feel both nimble and prepared. It assured me I had what I needed — and that I didn't need much.

With the bag at my side, I went to the Delacroix Museum. I went to Notre-Dame. I went to Burgundy, and to Marseille, and to London. I went to a delightful bistro near the opera house — the ugly one — and to an unspeakably bad play at the Théâtre du Châtelet. I went to a professor's flat to watch an Audrey Hepburn film, and to my boyfriend's apartment in the Tenth Arrondissement, where I lay with him in bed, naked, arguing about copyright law and *Anna Karenina*. I went to Julia Child's home, and a revival cinema, and a perfect sandwich shop with a marigold awning.

At the end of the semester, I left Paris. I broke up with the boyfriend. But I held tight to that shoulder bag.



Back in New York, I continued carrying the bag with me everywhere: to work, to Pad Thai dinners, to play auditions, to continuing-ed French classes.

Sometimes, friends would ask where I'd bought it. I'd shrug and say "Paris" with a mournful smile, as if to comfort them in the sad fact that they would never have a bag as perfect as mine.

But by the time I reached my mid-twenties, the bag had started to deteriorate. A zipper along the inner lining had become permanently stuck. The strap had begun to fray. A rough tear had appeared on the front panel.

Still, I held tight to the bag, kept stuffing it with thin sweaters, headshots, resumes, and a progression of increasingly sophisticated iPhones. I couldn't give it up: The bag was too ideally matched to my patchwork of hourly jobs, late-night rehearsals, and peregrinations around town.

I knew I needed a replacement. But where to find one? Every bag I encountered in the States was too bulky or bedazzled. I even scoured Paris for a successor. Three times I returned in the years following my semester abroad, and three times I went back to that same department store on the rue de Passy, hoping to find the same model.

I never did.



The first of these visits came in early 2011, almost a year after I graduated from college. Because the memory of my time in Paris still burned brightly in my chest, I'd expected the visit to feel easy and valedictory — a chance to slip back into the comforting grooves of life as a Continental, only now with a different boyfriend at my side.

Instead, I was surprised to find myself meandering around the Marais not with joy but with anxiety. As I sipped tea and ate couscous, I found myself wishing I were drunk, or underwater, or somewhere else entirely.

One night, my boyfriend and I got dinner at a comically quaint restaurant on Île St.-Louis, the island just east of Notre-Dame. Staring at my French onion soup I erupted into tears. From across the table, my boyfriend looked on, confused.

When I caught my breath, I tried to explain myself. Returning to Paris, I said, had thrown into relief how irrefutably over my college years were. Walking these streets had made me acutely aware that I would never again see them as a twenty-two-year-old, would

never again experience precisely that same sense of possibility and blossoming that had so defined my time here.

I knew I was young. But I wasn't college-young. I'd made decisive, important choices about my life, and while I understood this was a good thing — was, in fact, what marked me as an adult — such growth was not without its tradeoffs.

Getting older, I now understood, was about accepting limitations — of ability, of circumstance, of disposition. I couldn't do everything. I couldn't be anyone. I was myself: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

School and youth had granted the illusion that I was infinite, capable of so many lives, so many loves, so many careers. But now I understood, as I hadn't a year earlier, that life was *not* infinite, was *not* an endless series of patisseries, beckoning me inside. No, life was my shoulder bag, even then lying limp at my feet: limited, constrained, and capable of holding only so much.

When we finished dinner, the two of us wandered around Île St.-Louis in silence. I gazed up at the limestone facades and the wrought-iron balconies of the buildings.

The shoulder bag bounced lightly at my side.



The relationship ended. I moved. I moved again. I changed jobs. I went back to school. Along the way, I gave away old sweaters and old books and old IKEA rugs. Through it all, I never even considered getting rid of the shoulder bag, never even dreamed of stuffing it in the garbage or sending it on to Goodwill.

I held tight to that bag not just because it was so perfectly proportioned, or because a decade of my life was embedded — literally embedded — in the cheap weave of the fabric. No, I also clung to the bag because it stood as a kind of counterargument to my perpetual desire for *more*: more courage, more love, more intelligence, more wisdom, more experience.

To this, the bag said: You have what you need — and you don't need much.

Limitation keeps us light. *Light* is what I want to be. And *light* is what I am on those rare evenings when I still use the shoulder bag; when I lift it from the hook in my closet, stuff it with a few necessities, loop the frayed strap over my shoulder, and walk into the darkness, free and constrained in equal measure, ready for anything — everything — to come.

Click, bump. Click, bump. Click, bump.



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